

# A PHILOSOPHER IN POLITICS

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IN a quaintly ironical passage of the *Republic*,<sup>1</sup> Plato argues that men will never be well governed until all candidates for rulership are required to undergo a training in speculative philosophy. The suggestion is made with frank acknowledgment that it will be laughed at, and Plato is little indebted to those Platonic scholars who have tried to rescue his repute by diluting an audacious paradox into an idle truism. Struggle as they will to interpret "philosophy" in a sense which must make it seem a quite practical discipline, they are refuted by a glance at later sections of the *Republic*. Plato obviously meant to propose for rulers in the State a kind of intellectual preparation which most people of his time would think a hindrance rather than a help. Nor did they think so because they misunderstood. The more clearly they had understood, the more strongly they would have dissented. In this they were like not a few whom we still meet,—men who incessantly extol those "executive abilities" in which they suppose themselves to shine, at the expense of the intellectual attainments of which they are obviously destitute. Thus we hear from the commercial world that the State needs, above all, a business government with a business premier, that the first essential of the university is a business president, and even that the Church is yet to be saved by business bishops! On the assumption that weight of learning would be an embarrassment to such officials, care has been sometimes taken to exclude it in even that slight degree in which, one might surely suppose, it could do no harm. A few years ago, a similar cult was prevalent regarding "the strong, silent man"; but, as Mr. Lloyd George merrily pointed out, that cult has begun to decay, because men selected on the recommendation of their silence have so disappointed the enthusiasts by failing to reveal their "latent strength". Wholesome misgivings too have been started, here and there, by experience of colossal failure in those chosen for business qualities to direct what is not primarily business, so that encyclopaedic ignorance is no longer held quite so suggestive of governing efficiency. But, on the whole, the tide still runs high against the Platonic paradox, and we all know persons whose

1. *Republic*. (Rep. V, 473 D)

tolerance of "the philosopher", as at least harmless, would be changed into hatred of him, as a public peril, if they had a real inkling of what philosophy is.

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Three months ago, there was added to the obituary roll of British public men the name of one who exemplified in a remarkable degree just that blend of qualities which Plato had in mind. The word "great" should be applied sparingly, and the late Lord Balfour cannot be accounted either a great statesman or a great philosopher. But he had that peculiar strength which comes from high endowments of several kinds, each separately far surpassed, and yet with unparalleled value in their combination.

### I.

In his old age, he used to say that no other influence had acted quite so powerfully on his mind as that of his brother-in-law, who was also his tutor at Cambridge,—Professor Henry Sidgwick. "If ever a man was of the household of Socrates, it was he". Every student of Sidgwick's books will recognise what is here meant. It was the Socratic achievement of that great teacher to make his pupils see, first of all, how the problems of life and mind are far harder than they look, how a quick and obvious solution is pretty certain to be wrong, how facile generalizations should forthwith be suspected. Books like *The Methods of Ethics*, with their ceaseless marshalling of argument and counter-argument, exasperate readers who are in a hurry for "the truth", just as listeners were provoked in the Athenian agora during the last years of the fifth century B. C. by the initiator of "the dialectical method". In a mood of impatience with Sidgwick's indecision, one can almost understand why the poisoning of Socrates seemed at the time like the removal of a public nuisance. But in the Cambridge of those years, nearly three-quarters of a century ago, as truly as in the Athens of the first systematic thinker on ethics, there was being formed that type of mind which we call philosophic. Henry Sidgwick was teaching what was far more important than positive knowledge, even if such knowledge had been more attainable than it is. He was teaching certain intellectual habits:—suspense of judgment until evidence has been completely gathered, suspiciousness of intellectual short-cuts, watchfulness against the imposture of mere words and phrases that masquerade as thought. Incidentally, he was teaching the moral that is to be drawn from frequent and long continued philosophical disappointment. His

pupils learned to expect that no side in a real intellectual dispute will turn out to have been either wholly right or wholly wrong, and from this disillusionment an intellectual charity took its rise.

When one of those pupils became leader of the House of Commons, he constantly displayed a mind which had been fashioned so. It was the delight of Arthur James Balfour to take some rash generalization—about human nature, about government, about social progress—upon which “gentlemen opposite” had based a practical demand, and to dissect it as Socrates dissected the sweeping general maxims of a dogmatist in his Athenian audience. With the glow of dialectic festivity in his eye, he would challenge some confident “induction from experience”, some piece of evidence alleged to come from History, recalling the historical witness for cross-examination, and showing how the facts of experience could be restated with equal truth so as to support an induction quite different. It was exactly after the manner of the *Gorgias*, the *Protagoras*, the *Republic*. The House of Commons of to-day would find it irksome. But mid-Victorian statesmen belonged to the classical tradition. When Lord Balfour was a young M. P., Gladstone might sometimes be heard quoting Latin verse in a speech on foreign affairs. Such a thing could scarcely happen now. But is the change for the better? *O tempora, O mores!*

There is a charming quality about that sort of figure in politics, and probably no one who has written about Lord Balfour has omitted to use, somewhere or other, the word “charm”. But there is also in it a value that goes far beyond temperamental attractiveness. It takes so much of the sting out of political feuds! Nothing conduces more to bring disputants together than the discovery of how hard it is to be sure on the intricate issues which divide them. Party chieftains, who come to politics after a training in philosophic subtleties, should at least hesitate to accuse one another of taking the wrong side through sheer selfishness, or hypocrisy, or a generally low moral tone. For they have learned how many other sources of error are possible. Thus warm personal friendships, hard for their heated followers to understand and at times even to excuse, were known to exist between Lord Balfour and men so different as Lord Morley, Lord Oxford, and Mr. Lloyd George. Of course, “on the stump” in the country, the old idiom must be resumed. It was even said of Lord Balfour that he cultivated two styles, one for parliament, the other “extra-parliamentary”, and that it was recognized as against etiquette to remind him in the House of what he had said outside. A specimen of what he would say outside was his famous query about one of

Gladstone's proposals, whether anything of the sort had ever been proposed before, "by persons presumably sane and certainly at large". Once, too, in declaiming against the Premier's "unblushing perversion of fact", he declared it to be well known that only a lawyer's letter could induce Mr. Gladstone to retract a misstatement. But such is the license of extra-parliamentary eloquence, and no leader can afford to be exacting in the standard he sets up for a rival on country platforms. All men knew that the fundamentally hospitable mind of Lord Balfour was among the great assets of the House. The author of *A Defence of Philosophic Doubt* had cut away the roots of intellectual intolerance.

## II.

Philosophic insight, however, taken by itself, will carry a man a very short way in politics. It may well even obstruct him, especially on the platform, because it makes him so eager to do justice to both sides,—and one side of a case is as much as the average audience will hear attentively. In the atmosphere of the hustings, witty epigram goes further than cautious argument; the qualifying clause, "inserted for the sake of accuracy", seems mere confusion; and the hospitable mind is indistinguishable from what is vulgarly called "sitting on the fence". No wonder that philosophers, just in proportion as they are profound, are expected to fail in politics!

But, child of fortune as he was, the profundity of Lord Balfour's mind seems to have stopped short just about the point at which it might have ceased to promote, and begun to retard, his popular appeal. Keen as was his interest in speculation, philosophy was for him like anatomy for artists, a thing to be first acquired and then straightway forgotten in practice. Not forgotten in the sense of having wholly vanished, but persisting rather in the temperament it had formed than in rules it had imprinted. The sculptor must know where bones and muscles are; but it is a poor statue that obtrusively suggests the anatomical studies of the sculptor. Thus, too, Lord Balfour's art included an affectation of carelessness about those abstract principles whose bewildering intricacy was never long absent from his mind.

One can see a like trait in his literary style. Perhaps nothing else so reinforced his philosophic gifts as his extraordinary talent for clear exposition, and his extraordinary readiness in House of Commons debate. His delivery was not indeed attractive,—rather slow and hesitating, but the hesitation and slowness were never suggestive of a nervous man. They suggested perhaps at

times that he was a little bored, and—like the late Duke of Devonshire—found it hard to keep his attention on his own speech. But the apt phrase and the felicitous word always seemed to come in the end, not as a success of art, but with the inevitableness of nature. The vivid parallel, the illustration that lights up a whole argument, the scathing and ever-memorable satire, even—though at very rare moments—the flight of exquisite emotional appeal, all had the aspect of unstudied ease.

For the most striking examples of his literary power one must turn, not to his speeches, but to his books. Here, by a remarkable consensus of critical judgment, writer after writer in the past has singled out the same passage as combining Lord Balfour's distinctive excellences, very much as the opening paragraph of the *Souvenirs de ma jeunesse* has been chosen as the masterpiece of Ernest Renan. The passage comes from his first presentation of that plea which has recurred again and again in his books,—that without belief in the Christian essentials, and with only the natural-science view of human nature to rest upon, a ghastly shipwreck must be made of the real values of life:

Man, so far as natural science by itself is able to teach us, is no longer the final cause of the universe, the heaven-descended heir of all the ages. His very existence is an accident, his story a brief and transitory episode in the life of one of the meanest of the planets. Of the combination of causes which first converted a dead organic compound into the living progenitors of humanity, science indeed as yet knows nothing. It is enough that from such beginnings famine, disease and mutual slaughter, fit nurses of the future lords of creation, have gradually evolved after infinite travail a race with conscience enough to feel that it is vile and with intelligence enough to know that it is insignificant. We survey the past and see that its history is of blood and tears, of helpless blundering, of wild revolt, of stupid acquiescence, of empty aspirations. We sound the future, and learn that after a period long compared with the individual life, but short indeed compared with the divisions of time open to our investigation, the energies of our system will decay, the glory of the sun will be dimmed, and the earth tideless and inert will no longer tolerate the race which has for a moment disturbed its solitude. Man will go down into the pit, and all his thoughts will perish. The uneasy consciousness which in this obscure corner has for a brief space broken the contented silence of the universe will be at rest. Matter will know itself no longer. "Imperishable monuments" and "immortal deeds," death itself and love stronger than death will be as though they had never been. Nor will anything that *is* be better or worse for all that the labour, genius, devotion and suffering of man have striven through countless generations to effect.

Well might one critic say of this that, whatever be its philosophical value, on which opinions no doubt conflict, at least a passage of rare and moving eloquence had been added to English literature.<sup>2</sup>

### III.

With a mental subtlety keen enough to fascinate, but not profound enough to confuse, with a chaste lucidity that made his speeches at once incisive in debate and contributions to literature when printed, and with a cool resourceful temper on which he could depend even under strong provocation, Lord Balfour seemed made for parliament. Moreover, as the heir not only to large possessions but to a family tradition of public service, he had both the leisure that permitted him to indulge his taste, and the popular prestige which—half a century ago—had not yet begun to fade from the British “governing class”. But Nature had still another gift to bestow upon him. His personal ways of thinking, his whole view of life, coincided with the temperament of the people he aspired to lead. There is surely no greater guarantee of public success than this,—the power to express average opinion with a persuasiveness altogether exceptional, so that the listener discovers with delight that his own inmost preferences (which he had suspected to be rather foolish) were in truth the products of a lofty wisdom. Most audiences are irritated by the speaker who shows them how little they knew about some familiar problem until they had heard his address. The road to their favour is a cunning flattery, and Lord Balfour in taking it was quite honest. He firmly believed that the deepest statesmanship means just a systematising of those principles upon which Englishmen act. Thus once more, as was said about an early economist, was the national heart won by an advocate who turned the Englishman’s practice into a philosophy and himself into an ideal.

The English mind is indeed notoriously conservative. With a congenital aversion to the very word “new”, it is distrustful of sudden discoveries in government (and, indeed, in everything else), quick enough in deciding a point of conduct, but extremely unwilling to be forced into formal statement of the principle involved,—and this not through any fear of being proved “inconsistent”, for of such a reproach it is coldly contemptuous, but because it feels pretty sure of itself in a concrete decision, yet not at all sure of itself in threading the mazes of an abstract argument. This is why, as Burke well saw, the French and American Revolutions

2. Prof. Pringle-Pattison, in *Man's Place in the Cosmos*.

were so different from the English, and why from no English revolutionary leader could there ever have come such a document as the American *Declaration of Independence* or the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man*. Could, then, the English habit of mind have been more aptly expressed than in these words by Lord Balfour?

The wise man is content, in a sober and cautious spirit, with a full consciousness of his feeble powers of foresight and the narrow limits of his activity, to deal as they arise with the problems of his own generation.

Is it any wonder that Englishmen responded with such enthusiasm to a spokesman who could thus state for them the very spirit of their own behaviour, and who could proceed to defend it with a matchless ingenuity of proof and a dazzling wealth of illustration? Such critics as Mr. H. G. Wells abused them for a habit of "muddle", and they had an uneasy suspicion that the criticism might be right. George Meredith lamented that it was impossible "to make the practical Englishman settle his muzzle in a nosebag of ideas", and his countrymen felt a little hurt. But here was a disputant who would speak for them even with such ingenious enemies in the gate, and console them with evidence that, so far from being overconfident in their own wisdom, they had in truth been far wiser than they knew.

Lord Balfour entered parliament in 1874, under the spell of Disraeli, and at a time when the country was losing its breath in trying to keep pace with the Gladstonian speed of reform. An exhausted people is quick to find fault, and to approve of those by whom faults are pointed out. Resentment had begun to arise at the long series of raids on such ancient institutions as the Irish Church, the purchase system in the army, open voting, and the privileges of the licensed vintner. Gladstone and his colleagues had always the apostolic note in their appeal, and the defects—real or imaginary—of their legislation were easily represented as those inevitable in the work of the doctrinaire, the visionary, the fanatical prophet of a premature millennium. A generation that has become accustomed to hear Lord Birkenhead on Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations will easily appreciate how Disraeli then sneered at "plundering and blundering", "harassing every trade and worrying every profession". Lord Balfour's spirit and purpose were indeed far loftier, but he had caught the same subtle method of attack. In the next half-century the radical innovator is depicted in his speeches as careless or ignorant of unalterable facts, a devotee of phrase, eager for a leap in the dark,

and prepared, in the enthusiasm of a project that is a mere mirage, to inflict immediate injustices that are shockingly real; while true reform is shown to depend in the future, as it has always depended in the past, upon the slow and discriminating development of processes long since begun. With incomparable effectiveness, Lord Balfour thus built up the legend of the Conservative Party as the very spirit of England *in excelsis*, and of Liberalism as no more than a flaw that had somehow invaded the texture. He shared the halo with which he thus adorned his group. We may say of him, as Mr. Lytton Strachey has said of Palmerston,<sup>3</sup> that his wonderful dominance over his countrymen came from the fact that he thus seemed to express in himself the fundamental qualities of the English race. And we should add that in general he so expressed them as to make the Englishman justifiably proud.

Even his odd mannerisms, which would have been fatal to popularity elsewhere, contributed to his success, because—according to the legend—they were “so typically English”. People liked the cartoons that showed him in a lolling posture, a perfect picture of indolence, on the Front Treasury Bench. Writers of *causerie* told how he never prepared a speech, except for a few stray notes, generally scrawled on the back of an old envelope, and the reader chuckled to think how different was the laborious oratory that pleased the cruder taste of other countries. “How do you construct your perorations”, Lord Balfour was once asked, and he replied that he never did, but just stopped at the end of the first grammatical sentence. Such heedlessness of effect was welcomed as a mark of superiority! Countless similar stories have been retailed, no doubt many of them mythical, but some of them true, and each of them at least *ben trovato*, to show how English he was in his aloofness, his indifference to either praise or blame, his immunity from excitement in any situation and from passion for any cause. When a quarter of a million people had met in Hyde Park, to pass resolutions put simultaneously from fifty platforms in protest against his Education Bill, he acknowledged on persistent enquiry in the House that he had indeed heard some rumor of the event, and—after a moment’s puzzled knitting of his brows—asked a colleague beside him, in a sort of stage whisper, “Was it in Hyde Park?” When the M. P. who had lately defeated him after a terrific campaign in East Manchester was making his maiden speech in the House, Lord Balfour adjusted his pince-nez to bring the speaker into clear focus, and asked a neighbour, in a tone likewise meant to carry far, “Who is that?” When he visited the United States,

3. *Queen Victoria*, p. 6.

his way of dealing with eager reporters was excellent copy for the English press, and even his well-known statement that he never read a newspaper was quoted with apparent approval. How often, too, has the story been repeated about his visit to the Woolworth Tower,—how he said, on being told it was fireproof, “What a pity!”

## IV.

Sooner or later, every man of mark must reveal and must suffer from the defects of his qualities. It is mediocrity alone that is not subject to noticeable decline, and Lord Balfour had risen so high that his fall, when it should come, must be like Lucifer's. The political and social world in which he lived was changing fast; and as he began to grow old, it was not possible nor perhaps desirable for him to change with it. A tremendous difference had been made by the South African War, to a people with whom great wars were but a national tradition, not a national memory. That had been a challenging experience, crowded with so many surprises and so many mistakes—of poor diplomacy and confused national purpose and bad management in the field. Plainly there must at once be a great overhauling. The years that followed the Peace of Pretoria were no time for vacillation however skilful, for *insouciance* however elegant, or for further “muddling through” however artfully this might be represented as “the secret of England's greatness”. Thus the special talents which had made Lord Balfour supreme in his earlier period were his undoing in his later.

Looking back upon it, one can date the beginning of the collapse about 1903, the year in which Joseph Chamberlain resigned from the Balfour Cabinet, that he might preach without restraint yet another “unauthorized programme”. When those Protectionist appeals were stirring the country from end to end, and men of decision were each day falling into definite line on one side or the other, it passed the wit of man to guess whether the Prime Minister was with the insurgents or against them. Not that he hesitated to speak, sometimes at immense length,—but, unfortunately, on both sides! Those were days when *Punch* cartooned him as seated in a cell, wearing prison dress, while the mocking face of Chamberlain appeared at the cell window, and the letterpress below read: “Well, Arthur, I see you have got a settled conviction at last”. They were days when Mr. Winston Churchill would tell a Manchester audience that he had just emerged from a street fog, the thickest fog he had been in since he had last listened to one of the Prime Minister's perfectly clear expositions of fiscal policy. With true Churchillian impudence, all the more annoy-

ing for its basis of truth, he would add that, instead of getting a lead from the supposed leader, what the public had to accept was, from time to time,

three or four columns of insipid equivocation, which newspaper proprietors, whom he has taken the precaution to make barons, immediately declare to be another epoch-making pronouncement.

Nor was the situation improved when there came from the press the little brochure entitled *Economic Notes on Insular Free Trade*—with a warning that quotations must be made very sparingly, on pain of an action for infringed copyright! It was not this kind of guarded authorship on public issues which the reader thought himself entitled to expect from such a source at such a time. Philosophically, it was a brilliant piece of thrust and parry, with practical outcome of—goodness knew what! One felt that the writer had all the joy of a dialectical swordsman in its composition. But the public felt bored, and rather angry.

What happened in the next two years, the closing years of his active leadership, might well have given Plato material for a separate dialogue. One by one, the resolute spirits in his Cabinet—some on one side and some on the other in the convulsing controversy of the hour—refused to share responsibility with a chieftain who seemed unable to make up his mind. No doubt the reason might be that he saw so many more sides of the case than they saw, but there were only two division lobbies, and, with such meagre light as they had, men must vote in one or other—regardless of the Premier's apparent advice that they should vote in both! Other issues, too, were looming up on the horizon,—problems of Labour, problems of the old-age pension, problems of the school, the eternal problem of Ireland—and what had in these matters long seemed judicious moderation had at length, by its increasingly obvious failure, come to be thought of as idle shuffling. Full of apprehension that a new time was upon them, men on both sides of the House felt that one so completely of the old time as the Prime Minister was not the man to meet it. He was so incurably Victorian!

Those last months of the Balfour Cabinet in 1905 will live in the memory of all who then watched British parliamentary affairs with interest. Forsaken by nearly all the first-class minds of his own party, and with his majorities dwindling fast, he fought his lone battle, night after night, with marvellous agility and resource. Confronted by one of the most powerful Oppositions in the record of parliament, with an Asquith, a Grey, a Haldane, a Lloyd George, and a Winston Churchill united against him, while

in his own group Sir Austen Chamberlain furnished the heaviest piece of debating artillery at his command, he never lost heart, nor in the very darkest hour of impending defeat was there a dimming in the lambent flame of his satiric wit. Night after night, though against such odds, debating honours lay with the single champion, so that even the ranks of Tuscany could scarce forbear to cheer. But those were Pyrrhic victories, and though it was said that "one can't help admiring his finesse in the House", the tide of impatience in the country was rising. Social reforms were clamant, and not to be put off with an epigram. Men in earnest about problems of poverty and education and the Irish national demand were not to be ham-strung in their enterprise by argument in support of "philosophic doubt". At the polls in the winter of 1905, the Conservative party was not merely defeated, but annihilated. Its steady majority of 150 at the previous election was displaced by a majority against it more than twice as great as the greatest previously known in the history of British politics. When the House met, with supporters of the Government crowding both sides of the Chamber, Mr. Churchill insisted on referring to the Conservatives not as "the party opposite", but as "the party in that corner"! With the dauntless spirit that had sustained him in the past, the leader against such overpowering hosts hurled at them a peculiarly bitter sarcasm. They were a mixed lot, he said,—Liberals and Labour and Irish and Socialists and what not; no army, because their command was not unified, nor were their purposes the same; rather like one of those vast eastern hordes recorded in history, men armed and clothed in different fashions, shouting different war-cries, owning no common allegiance, and held together only by the precarious bond of a common hope of plunder.

## V

For only two years out of the previous twenty had Lord Balfour been in Opposition, and a decade had passed since he had last addressed the House from Mr. Speaker's left. But his striking talent for destructive and often derisive criticism had a great opportunity when he faced a Government whose pre-election undertakings had been so vast and varied, to groups very different in demand, and all alike in eagerness. Those unreasonable disappointments which follow upon the arousing of unreasonable hopes can always be turned to account by an Opposition leader, and the dexterous parliamentarian who took up this task had a merry time with such subjects as Chinese Labour on the Rand,

Irish Home Rule, Trade-Unions, Women's Suffrage, and the problem of denominational schools. But though his debating brilliance remained the same, it was soon felt that he had not his old command over his own party. Smarting under so terrible a defeat, his followers began to murmur, like the Israelites in the wilderness, about the way they had been led. What was the use of being brilliant at the enemy's expense in the House, if all grip on the country was being lost? Could they afford to be led by a philosophic dilettante when, on every side, men were eager for action? Besides, younger spirits were challenging supremacy in that very mordant dialectic which had been thought Lord Balfour's own. What tremendous promise there seemed to be in this young swordsman from the North,—F. E. Smith, the member for Liverpool! Even the artistic sarcasm which the leader was directing against the Scottish Lord Advocate did not surpass the polished insolence with which that stripling had defied the overwhelming odds against them in the debate on the Address.<sup>4</sup> But, after all, did such dialectical victories do much for them? What they wanted was action, and such eloquence, from the benches of an insignificant group, was falling very flat.

It was in such a mood that the party changed its leadership. Choice fell on Mr. Andrew Bonar Law, and Lord Balfour retired, after a speech of characteristic skill to the followers he had so long led. The slogan current in the intervening months, "B.M.G.", (Balfour Must Go), together with the selection of his successor, showed that it was on a militant policy of Tariff Reform that the fighting Conservatives had fixed their hope. By a curious coincidence, the same slogan, without the change of a single letter, seems now to have become a menace once again, to a chieftain who has tried very much the same Fabian policy of postponement with the same group on the same issue. Mr. Stanley Baldwin, if report be not altogether wrong, sees just that handwriting once more on the wall, "B.M.G.". And he might fairly ask his party

4. It was in the debate on the Address that Mr. F. E. Smith (now Lord Birkenhead, referring to the expressed gratitude of some Free Church ministers because Providence had led the electors to vote Liberal, coined one of his best remembered retorts. He did not mind, he said, more than most men, being cheated at cards, but he did object to his opponent's claim that such success was won through partnership with the Almighty. Lord Balfour's attack on Mr. Ure, for representing that old age pensions would be in danger if the Conservatives came into power, contained the famous passage about "the cold and calculated lie" that was meant to deceive the most helpless part of the community. "I am sorry," he added, "that Mr. Ure is a Scotsman. . . . He has disgraced the office which he holds, he has disgraced the profession to which he belongs, and he has disgraced the country in which he was born."

whether—like the Bourbons—they have really learned nothing and forgotten nothing from the experience of that former insurrection.

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When the generation that knew Lord Balfour is gone, will the historian keep his memory alive for any outstanding achievements?

It is easy to point out how some of the things he achieved, amid such contemporary acclaim, have had to be undone. He did them brilliantly, but they often had to be reversed both with difficulty and with loss. His Irish policy, for example! Those "twenty years of resolute government" which he was sent to Ireland to inaugurate, and which he did inaugurate with such skill, such tenacity, such persisting courage! Where so many political reputations had found their grave, his found its birth-place. But the reputation born there has had a short life, and men can now see—on looking back—what tragedy was maturing in those years of Balfourian success. Of the South African policy which it was his delight to defend, and of the war of 1899-1901 which furnished him with so many sparkling epigrams at the expense of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and "Little Englandism", it is sufficient to recall that a later Administration was quick to abandon all the fruits, and that but for the men he so successfully ridiculed there would be no British South Africa to-day. And as he struggled to preserve the old constitutional system against radical attack, could he have served the cause of his opponents more effectively than by one amazing avowal, quoted from end to end of the country against him? The House of Lords, he said, should be so used as to ensure this result, that whether in Opposition or in power, the Conservative party would always have the direction of public affairs in their hands!

But over against all such complaints of his management at home, and all party laments that he had led Conservatism to at least premature disaster, his countrymen will remember how great was his achievement abroad, and from how many perils he defended a cause higher far than that of party. "No Prime Minister," said Lord Lansdowne, "ever gave closer and more unremitting attention to foreign affairs." If he often missed his step in the labyrinth of party politics, Lord Balfour was wonderfully sure-footed at a most critical time in negotiating with the Chancelleries of Europe. Who exactly was the chief architect of the *Entente Cordiale*, no one who knows will inform us. But it was framed during Lord Balfour's premiership, and it seems to be an open

secret that it fell to him more than to anyone else to carry into immediate and successful execution. How much that was to mean to Great Britain and France, how many other causes it would be worth while to postpone for the sake of it, no one could forecast in 1903. But for the sagacity shown at the Foreign Office in those days, it was the directing mind of Lord Balfour that was chiefly to be thanked.

Someone has said that to him should be applied the old characterization, "the sublime of mediocrity". That descriptive phrase is indeed by no means always such a reproach as it looks. It is good for a nation to develop its occasional geniuses, but not to develop them too often, for they mean desperate risk as well as splendid possibility. Whatever they do, good or bad, will be on the grand scale, and a steady supply of mere talent is needed to balance them. Not even the philosophers, who have probably done him scantiest justice of all, have denied that Lord Balfour's talent was high. Philosophically not less than politically, he shone in destructive criticism, and his own acuteness in destruction so mastered him that he would often destroy not only a rival speculator, but the very speculative enterprise itself! As one reads *A Defence of Philosophic Doubt*, one recognizes the same mind that in politics tended always to disparage enthusiasm. Those who disparage it have indeed their important place,—to check the over-confidence alike of investigators and of reformers. The critical philosopher has to remind the eager zealot of the narrowly placed limits that stop both the intellectual progress and the moral transformation of humanity. But when, in recoil from his own critical pessimism, Lord Balfour turned to re-lay in the soil of the will those foundations of belief which he had shattered in the soil of the intellect, and again to justify popular institutions which he thought intrinsically bad by assuming them always subject to the control of oligarchs in the background, he invited the mocking comment that once again a philosopher was lost in his own subtleties. Lord Balfour, having first profited, was next doomed to suffer from his own sort of speculative activity. If he had been either less or more of a philosopher, he might have escaped that fatal contempt he had not only for certain enthusiasms but for all enthusiasm. Here is one of the mistakes, not few in number, from which some men are saved by their dullness and others by their depth. Once more is exemplified the great doctrine of Bacon, that philosophy pursued a short way can be corrected only by philosophy pursued to the end.